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**A Forgotten Lesson for Contemporary Counterinsurgency Operations: The  
Combined Action Program**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of  
the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily  
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research identifies and analyzes the Marine Corps' Combined Action Program in the Vietnam War, how it was initiated and employed in a counterinsurgency strategy, and whether this concept has any validity in today's counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq. As this program developed over time, it proved successful in disrupting multiple tenets of the Vietnam insurgency. This program started in 1965 throughout the Marine Corps area of operations but did not receive support from the operational commander and his staff, therefore a unified strategy to defeat the insurgency never materialized. Critical to success for the operational commander in irregular warfare is first having an understanding of its nature, assisted by historical analysis, and then applying the proper solution to the problem. The Combined Action Program alone cannot defeat the insurgency but a contemporary program will provide US military leaders a supporting strategy as they continue counterinsurgency operations in Iraq.

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## INTRODUCTION

This is another type of war new in its intensity, ancient in its origins-war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins; war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration, instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him...it requires in those situations where we must counter it...a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training.

John F. Kennedy, 1962<sup>1</sup>

In today's environment, it is problematic to develop an innovative model that will become useful to the operational commander and his staff. However, there are numerous lessons from past wars that must not be overlooked, even when discussing the nightmares of Vietnam. One such concept is the combined action program (CAP)<sup>2</sup> started by the USMC. This program can provide the operational commander two essential characteristics when conducting a counterinsurgency operation, security and intelligence. This supporting strategy embedded in a unified effort will provide the operational commander an economy of force that attacks all tenets of the insurgency in Iraq today.

As a result of America's first military defeat in history, the Vietnam War is rarely discussed in conjunction with any successes. When Vietnam is discussed it is usually in the format of what not to do and how not to fight. The outcome of this experience turned the US military away from counterinsurgency warfare toward the war it prefers to engage-large scale conventional. Furthermore, with the US military lacking the desire to

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Field Manual 90-8, Counter guerrilla Operations. August 1986, p. iv.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper when CAP is mentioned it will generically mean the combined action group, combined action company, and combined action platoon. This author's focus is the concept for application today, and not the specific task organization. A recommended task organization will be included at the conclusion of this paper.

understand and prepare for this environment, the military professional education system faltered in training and preparing leaders the tools required to successfully defeat an insurgency.<sup>3</sup> Today, this system is in crisis action mode developing doctrine, relearning and revising lessons learned from three decades past to prevent Iraq from becoming the next Vietnam.

Three decades ago, the US military had two strategies for winning the war in Vietnam - a conventional war of attrition and the other war of pacification with the latter having the least amount of influence from senior military leaders.<sup>4</sup> In Iraq, it can be argued that our US military has a striking similarity to its last major counterinsurgency endeavor and is struggling to identify a unified strategy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine one aspect of the counterinsurgency strategy from Vietnam-the combined action program instituted by the USMC. This paper will argue that a contemporary combined action program implemented in Iraq could effectively attack all tenets (population, insurgent, sanctuary, ideology, and external support) of the insurgency. This program is not a “one shot kill” to defeat the insurgency but rather a military strategy that incorporated with successful political and economic systems arguably will produce a counterinsurgency victory. The paper will provide an overview of the combined action program in Vietnam by the USMC, discuss the current nature of the counterinsurgency in Iraq, and identify lessons from the combined action program in Vietnam that are applicable to the counterinsurgency effort in Iraq today.

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<sup>3</sup> Nigel Aylwin-Foster, “Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations,” Military Review, November-December 2005, 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Michael E. Peterson, The Combined Action Platoons: The U.S. Marines’ Other War In Vietnam (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 21-22.

However, this program will succeed only if operational commanders unify all efforts under one strategy.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

In June 1965 General Westmoreland requested forty-four allied and US battalions deploy to Vietnam to defeat the Viet Cong (VC) guerrillas and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). This concept for waging war, overwhelming force to minimize casualties, had become deeply embedded within the senior military and political leaders of the US based on their experiences in the last century of traditional, conventional warfare.<sup>5</sup> The US military did not prepare itself for unconventional, counterinsurgency operations and continued planning for the next symmetrical war. The US not only had success in conventional warfare but also envisioned future wars being fought in that environment.<sup>6</sup>

When the USMC first implemented the CAP in 1965, almost four years had past since the first attempt of pacification by US Army Special Forces (SF) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) program. This program achieved much success and growth institutionalizing the “oil spot” concept. However, by July 1963 Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) wanted SF in offensive operations as opposed to supporting fix site pacification programs and turned control of the villages to the unprepared Vietnamese Special Forces.<sup>7</sup> This lack of understanding of irregular warfare and misuse of forces by operational commanders ultimately led to a strategy of attrition that handed the US their first defeat of the twentieth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., The Army and Vietnam (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 70-71

To verify if the CAP has any validity within the ongoing insurgency in Iraq, it's vital to reexamine the strategy during Vietnam and identify successes and failures. Moreover, it's necessary to discuss the environment in Iraq today, and compare each other to determine if the CAP will support a successful military strategy for the US. Finally, the US military and political leaders must persistently re-examine past conflicts and lessons learned to prepare its forces to succeed in asymmetrical and uncertain environments and not the wars it prefers to engage based on historical successes.

### **COMBINED ACTION PROGRAM OVERVIEW**

The concept for the CAP within the USMC began in the early twentieth century during a period known as the “banana wars.” More specifically it was the Nicaraguan campaign from 1925-33 in which the USMC supported the Nicaraguan National Guard in their counterinsurgency operations to defeat the Sandino movement. From this experience, the USMC developed the *Small Wars Manual* in 1940 that provided doctrine for conducting counterinsurgency operations.<sup>8</sup> This manual was the nucleus for the USMC strategy in Vietnam. Within this manual it defined the differences between regular and irregular warfare:

In regular warfare, the responsible officers simply strive to attain a method of producing the maximum physical effect with the force at their disposal. In small wars, the goal is to gain decisive results with the least application of force and the consequent minimum loss of life. The end aim is the social, economic, and political development of the people subsequently to the military defeat of the enemy insurgent. In small wars, tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be keynote of our relationship with the mass of the population.<sup>9</sup>

In March of 1965, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division arrived in Vietnam under the command of Lieutenant General Lewis Walt. Walt was a student of the “banana wars” and *Small*

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<sup>8</sup> Peterson, 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Krepinevich, 172.

*Wars Manual*, which shaped his understanding of irregular warfare and introduced the first CAP in Vietnam on August 3, 1965. Periodically, Walt discussed strategy with district advisors inside his area of operations regarding employment of his Marines. During one such meeting it was recommended to combine Marines with local Vietnamese militias who would patrol, train, eat, sleep, and live together in the villages-as one.<sup>10</sup> Once Walt had an understanding of the warfare in Vietnam, he applied lessons learned about insurgencies and implemented the first CAP through the 3/4 Marines.

Within the CAP, the combined action platoon became its tactical arm. This platoon was organized with a 13-man USMC infantry squad, a 30-man Vietnamese militia platoon or popular forces (PF), and one US Navy corpsman. To be selected for the CAP, Marines needed to volunteer, have served in Vietnam for two months, have six remaining in country, and be recommended by their commander. Furthermore, these Marines needed to show compassion for the Vietnamese people and if selected, would attend a two-week indoctrination course on the Vietnamese language and culture, and further instruction in small-unit tactics.<sup>11</sup>

As the CAP gained momentum and began to expand, Walt appointed a director to oversee its organization, selection, and provide specific tasks the platoons were to accomplish. In July 1967, six mission sets were identified:

1. Destroy the communist infrastructure within the platoon's area of responsibility.
2. Protect public security; help maintain law and order.
3. Organize local intelligence networks.
4. Participate in civil action and conduct propaganda against the communists.
5. Motivate and instill pride, patriotism, and aggressiveness in its militia.

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<sup>10</sup> F.J.West, *The Village* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Keith F. Kopets, "The Combined Action Program: Vietnam," *Military Review*, July/August 2002, 79.

6. Conduct training for all members of the combined action platoon in general military subjects, leadership, and language, and increase the proficiency in the militia platoons so it can function effectively without the USMC.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the CAP needed its own chain of command as opposed to being subordinate to the commander of their operating area to succeed in the pacification strategy and ensure intelligence was fused within each hamlet of a village. The infantry battalion commanders were not in the business of winning hearts and minds. Search and attack was their focus, which created friction within the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division. Contrary to Walt's directive to send only their best Marines into the program, commanders hesitated based on the lack of replacements to compensate their losses. The increase in CAP caused for a typical robbing Peter to pay Paul scenario.<sup>13</sup>

Adding resistance to Walt's CAP concept was the emerging dual strategy between the Army's search and attack plan of attrition and the USMC's clear and hold of pacification. In 1965, the National Command Authority failed to have a clear understanding of the nature of the war. In a memorandum, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Wheeler, stated the problem in Vietnam was military not political. In contrast, French General Beaufre, who served in Indochina in the 1950s, stated the war could only be resolved politically by legitimizing the South Vietnamese government.<sup>14</sup> By not properly identifying the true nature of the war, the US failed to adopt a unified solution to defeat the insurgency.

The Army's plan of attrition assumed it could wear down the enemy and their support network, and eventually deny their ability to wage war or destroy their will to

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 79

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> James Donovan, "Combined Action Program: Marines Alternative to Search and Destroy," Vietnam, August 2004, 28.

continue. This strategy did not materialize because the enemy controlled the engagements by initiating approximately 80 percent of the platoon and company level battles. During these actions, if the enemy determined they were at a disadvantage, they would simply break contact and return to their sanctuary. Contrary to this technique, the enemy was willing to withstand large casualties and still continue with their war efforts. The NVA and VC would trade ten for one regarding casualties and ultimately won the war of wills.<sup>15</sup> Their understanding of the war was correct.

The USMC strategy of pacification differentiated from the war of attrition whereby the Marines conducted war inside the hamlets and the Army on the hamlets. The CAP built trust with the people, trained them to defend their homes, developed an intelligence network to identify VC, and improved their quality of life. The USMC had a systematic strategy that started with the CAP and proceeded into a clear and hold or “oil spot” concept (figure 1)<sup>16</sup> which meant as areas became secure the Vietnamese would take control and the CAP moved to the next hamlet.<sup>17</sup> Their ultimate goal was to work themselves out of a job. This “oil spot” concept<sup>18</sup> moves from region to region and denies insurgents sanctuary and support. The problem with this concept is the extended time needed to achieve success, which contradicts US philosophy of a quick decisive victory. Therefore, a conventional approach utilizing overwhelming force assumed the main effort that won the battles but ultimately lost the war.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 26

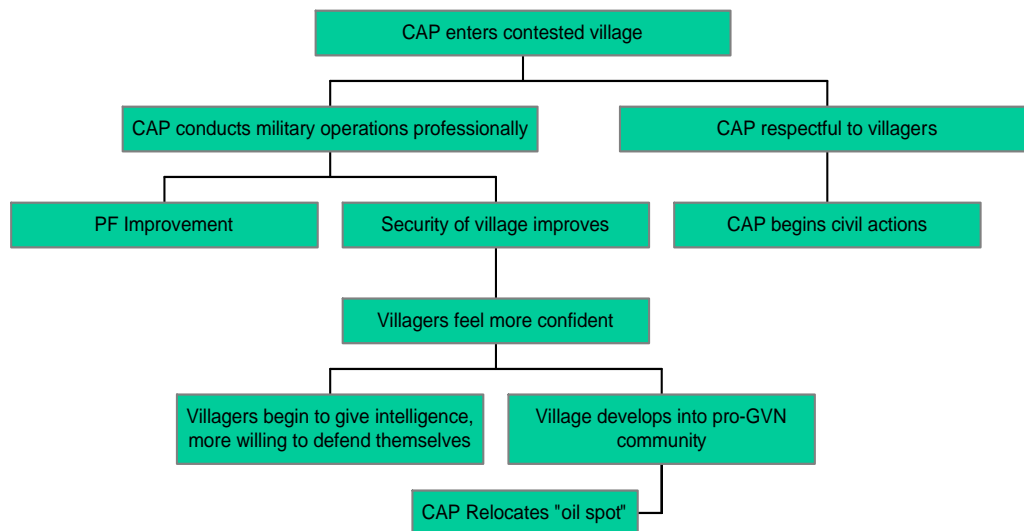
<sup>16</sup> Raymond C. Damm, “The Combined Action Program: A Tool For The Future,” Marine Corps Gazette, October 1998, 51.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>18</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., “How to Win in Iraq,” Foreign Affairs, September/October 2005, 95.

When the USMC envisioned the CAP, finding an ally they could trust and work with, provide language and cultural expertise, prove mission critical. The PF were at the bottom of the Government of Vietnam (GVN) security forces but met the USMC initial requirements. The PF were recruited to protect their own hamlet or village and with few

### Schematic of CAP Operations



**Figure 1.**

exceptions, were an incompetent fighting force. They were poorly trained and equipped, and only received half the pay of the regular Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Moreover, their inability to defeat the VC contributed to high desertion rates and their lack of patrolling, day or night, led to the VC controlling the countryside.

In true USMC fashion, they would make the PF an efficient and effective fighting force within the CAP.<sup>19</sup> This endeavor was imperative for the pacification strategy to succeed.

<sup>19</sup> Albert Hemingway, Our War Was Different: Marine Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 4.

It's hard to evaluate the successes of the CAP due to the fact it was never fully exploited and the US lost the war. However, it has been noted that no hamlet or village that was turned over from the USMC CAP to the Vietnamese ever returned to VC control. That may be somewhat extreme but the fact is there were successes the US needs to evaluate and analyze for future application. One critical aspect to evaluate is the result from when the program started until it was disbanded. Initially, the Marines were all volunteers, both into the CAP and the USMC itself. As the war progressed CAP personnel were assigned instead of volunteering and back in the US, the draft had been implemented. One must also look at the time a CAP worked within a specific hamlet, which tended to be more successful the longer they stayed.<sup>20</sup> Finally, I would argue when villagers identify VC and provide accurate intelligence, as well as assist in their security, a CAP had succeeded.

Identifying weaknesses within the CAP are just as difficult but two stand out: the language and cultural barriers, and the selection process.<sup>21</sup> As the CAP progressed, it would have been beneficial to assign Marines in the US to the program. With this, a longer indoctrination program would have prepared Marines mentally for operating within the Vietnamese culture. As with any sensitive program, selection and training of the right personnel is vital for success. Finally, if there was one overarching weakness regarding the CAP concept it arguably was the absence of a unified strategy at the operational commander's level to defeat the insurgency.

As with most small unit activities in denied areas, a high level of risk is accepted. The initial stages were the highest based on the uncertainties of the environment and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 109

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 177

relationship with the local people. It was well-known CAP personnel, especially the Marines, who were the principle target for the VC.<sup>22</sup> Based on the CAP concept of economy of force, when they did establish contact with the enemy it was never with overwhelming fire and friendly casualties were usually high. In comparison to conventional infantry units that did achieve overwhelming fires, Marines in the CAP were wounded at a much higher rate. Finally, the day after day of patrolling, enemy contacts, and daily tasks in extreme weather took its toll on the Marines.<sup>23</sup> Critical to ensuring the Marines never reached complacency was the non-commissioned officer in charge (NCOIC). His leadership ability in a decentralized, asymmetrical environment proved decisive to the survivability of the Marines and winning.

## **CONTEMPORARY ATTACK ON INSURGENCY TENETS**

### ***POPULATION***

The Iraqi people have not fully supported the insurgency nor have they contributed significantly to ejecting those who favor these extremists. In the Iraqi population, ethnic, ideological, and theological diversity varies from the different regions within Iraq. These will be additional and complex challenges for a successful CAP but with the proper selection of personnel and training, this program could succeed in supporting a unified counterinsurgency effort.

When a CAP first arrives into an assigned area, the initial test will be the trust factor on each side. The CAP must remain on a high level of security and maintain situational awareness all without insulting the Iraqi people during this sensitive period. The CAP NCOIC must win this endeavor. However, the concept of living with the Iraqi

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<sup>22</sup> West, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 106

people as well as training, fighting, and suffering will win this trust rapidly. Working with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi Army (IA) personnel will also assist in this endeavor by demonstrating to Iraqis the US commitment of enhancing their security and military organization. The critical test for the CAP will be their ability to provide a secure environment for Iraqis, which will win their support and gain momentum toward legitimizing the Iraqi government.<sup>24</sup>

To all those who have studied this irregular nature of war, it is obvious that political and military efforts must focus on the enemy center of gravity-the people and winning their support.<sup>25</sup> And because US and coalition forces cannot shield Iraqis from the daily violence and employment is weak, the people have chosen any means available to survive. It is the people who allow the insurgent freedom to maneuver throughout a given area. Without the people, the insurgent has no lifeline and will be defeated. Therefore, once “hearts and minds” have been won and Iraqis are secure and legitimately employed, intelligence, a key to defeating the insurgents, will become more efficient. Perfecting intelligence is vital for a successful counterinsurgency effort and human intelligence (HUMINT), not technologically advanced systems, can only provide this.<sup>26</sup> The CAP will support this in Iraq by living with the people 24/7 and sharing the same hardships as well as celebrating the same victories. The Iraqi people are not satisfied listening to US promises of a prosperous future. Instead, they want the daily indiscriminating attacks to end and employment to increase.

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<sup>24</sup> John A. Lynn, “Patterns of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” Military Review, July-August 2005, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices In Counterinsurgency,” Military Review, May/June 2005, 9.

<sup>26</sup> James J. Schneider, “T.E. Lawrence and the Mind of an Insurgent,” Army, July 2005, 34.

One of the initial priorities of the CAP to win “hearts and minds” will be daily engagements with the Iraqi people in order to learn about their culture, religion, and ideology. However, this could take months to accomplish without a positive outcome guaranteed and today the will of the American people is diminishing. The CAP personnel must demonstrate to the Iraqi people that this is not a war between two civilizations but against extremists and the US is only interested in finding those individuals. Therefore, the personnel selected for the CAP must be able to wear a diplomatic and warrior hat. Moreover, the CAP must take advantage of recent historical situations where the US assisted Muslims against extremism, Bosnia and Kosovo for example, and emphasize throughout an information operations strategy. Ideally, opening this seam will gain support of the people and isolate the insurgent, a key to success.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, support for winning the Iraqi population will come from civil-affairs activities that increase basic living conditions and livelihood. These simple activities include sewage disposal, water treatment, electricity, health care, and education institutes.<sup>28</sup> The Iraqis will increase their support to the CAP when these activities succeed, especially when both parties achieve them. CAP personnel will need to know how to fix a generator that is supplying electricity for a hospital as well as capturing and killing insurgents. It will be the operational commander who unifies these activities under one umbrella to win the support of the Iraqi population.

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<sup>27</sup> Foster, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4

## ***INSURGENT***

Without much argument, the US is the stand-alone force on the conventional battlefield and as such has focused its military on winning in this environment decisively. However, once the conventional phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) concluded, this conventional warfighting system proved ill suited to conduct irregular warfare.<sup>29</sup> As the US transitioned from conventional to counterinsurgency operations the conventional mentality of overwhelming force was not negated and operational commanders did not adapt rapidly which has driven a wedge between the population, Iraqi government, and coalition forces. The US did not “focus” force properly which resulted in indiscriminating acts of violence against neutral Iraqis. These Iraqis will never succumb to the new “Iraq.” These acts have undermined the US and Iraqi governments ability to secure their people and ultimately a large number of innocent people have suffered. The US as well as IA and ISF need to “focus” their violence whereby using a sniper weapon system for example as opposed to an M1 tank or pre-assault fires.<sup>30</sup> The US military must show tactical patience and allow intelligence to foster, which will assist in limiting collateral damage. Bottom line is that the US has not won the support of the Iraqi people when utilizing overwhelming force and the insurgents still maintain freedom to maneuver.

The CAP can “focus” its efforts toward the insurgent and reduce these indiscriminating acts. As noted earlier, the CAP concept of living with the Iraqis will provide improved intelligence that will allow for surgical applications of force against the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>30</sup> Lynn, 24.

insurgent. Restraint-not hurting the wrong people-is a key to successful counterinsurgency operations.<sup>31</sup> However, a valid argument is that US forces will be at a greater risk for casualties by not using overwhelming fires. Detailed planning with quick reaction forces as well as close air support can mitigate this.

Ideally, as the CAP gains confidence with the ISF and IA and visa-versa, it will be Iraqis who capture and kill insurgents thus eliminating the US against Iraqi theme, which will support the IO strategy of Iraqis securing Iraq. As the ISF and IA become more confident and competent, and local people have the ability to defend themselves, the CAP can move to another contested area and start over hence the “oil spot” spreads.

As the CAP resides in a specific area, it must continuously conduct patrols, day and night, with IA or ISF, to assist in securing Iraqi people and preventing the insurgent’s freedom to maneuver. Throughout patrols random stops to talk with Iraqis about their concerns will strengthen the CAP legitimacy. Moreover, prosecuting insurgent targets as “soft” as possible will further prevent indiscriminate suffering. When conducting offensive operations it will benefit CAP personnel to stay in the background as much as possible and allow Iraqis to police the insurgents with the understanding that no human right violations will be tolerated. These tactics and techniques will support winning the population.

Lastly, the CAP can support an information operation (IO) campaign that highlights the atrocities of the insurgent and their future desires for a lawless Iraq. This campaign should stress a new Iraq that is secure and economically sound with Iraqis controlling Iraq. And there requires a strategy for an amnesty program to allow

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

insurgents to leave their cause without extreme consequences. These tactics, techniques, and procedures are only one avenue for success that should be coordinated with all other military and political efforts by the operational commanders to achieve a counterinsurgency victory. Based on historical and recent analysis, attacking insurgents discriminately will be a CAP strength.

### ***SANCTURY***

The ability of the insurgent to plan, organize, rest, and refit in uncontested areas has allowed the Iraqi insurgency to withstand countless tactical defeats from the US, IA, ISF, and their coalition partners. The urban areas of Baghdad, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Mosul will be difficult to root out every insurgent. The insurgent can move within the masses and wait for a vulnerability to be exploited. The CAP will struggle in this environment for the simple issue of size and numbers, which is why one specific CAP template will not succeed in all areas. In the urban areas, the CAP can reside within local police stations and work hand in hand with the ISF. Constant patrolling will establish an official presence that enhances security and confidence in the Iraqis, and ultimately will prove vital to any successes.<sup>32</sup> The struggle will be security and the relationships with the local Iraqis which will not be as rapid as in the rural area therefore intelligence will not be as accurate or dependable.

In the rural environment, the CAP will be more successful denying sanctuary due to the smaller population and less built-up area to clear and observe. Also, frequent patrols as well as small unit tactics, that will be effective with solid intelligence, will prove more successful. As the insurgents rely on the population to survive, population

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<sup>32</sup> Sepp, 11.

control measures can be implemented that will support separating the insurgent from the population.<sup>33</sup> Random checks during patrols will assist this method as well as vehicle checkpoints. This is another non-lethal means to attack the insurgency and not put the Iraqi people in danger. At the tactical level this will succeed, however, US forces will again assume greater risk.

The most important aspect of this tenet is that operational commanders have a unified strategy. For example, if the commander in the Tal Afar region has implemented a CAP throughout his area of operation but the commander in the Al Anbar region has not, but routinely conducts offensive operations then returns to his forward operating base (FOB), the insurgents will flock to the uncontested area, just like a dam breakage. As noted earlier this was the problem in Vietnam and arguably today in Iraq there are different strategies for defeating the insurgency. Conventional leadership in an unconventional environment is an argument for this non-unity. SF commanders have studied this nature of war throughout their careers but are not in senior leadership positions in Iraq to influence a unified effort.

### ***IDEOLOGY***

The ideology of the radical insurgent supporter for establishing a fundamentalist Islamic Iraq is vulnerable to attack on numerous levels. Ultimately it will take all elements of US and Iraqi national instruments of power in a coordinated effort to change the thinking and behavior of these extremists. Transforming the true believer will be a protracted effort to succeed that may take a generation to overcome. Moreover, an additional challenge has risen throughout the state. The insurgency in Iraq has multiple

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 10

ideologies to attack. The first is Al Qaeda with a desired end state to transform Iraq into a pre-9/11 Afghanistan. The next is Sunni centric with a nationalistic flavor for the minority ruling the masses.<sup>34</sup> A CAP can provide limited influence in this arena with a coherent IO strategy that exploits the atrocities of the insurgents, influences the neutral Iraqis to stay out of the fight, and promotes a healthy US-Iraq partnership for peace.

The CAPs ability to influence the population will be difficult at first but once rapport is built between the two sides, the IO strategy could establish a foothold and exploit a seam between the insurgent and population. With daily attacks on the Iraqi population, US and coalition forces, this portion of the strategy will not be hard to influence, but will the population listen? The primary theme needs to focus on Muslims killing Muslims and the false interpretations of the Koran. However, only the concept of the CAP inside the population struggling hand and hand with this violence will support this strategy.

Influencing the neutral Iraqis can be achieved once the CAP has established rapport with the population. The message to the Iraqis will be to stay neutral and peace will prosper, conversely, if you help the insurgents the US, IA, and ISF will continue offensive military operations that potentially could cause more suffering.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, as the CAP expands its credibility within the population, this will support the decency of the US not as an occupier but as an ally. There is no easy fix in this area and each region will be different but a CAP could produce positive results. This

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, "Iraq Is Not Vietnam," *Policy Review*, December 2005, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Robert R. Tomes, "Relearning Counterinsurgency Warfare," *Parameters*, Spring 2004, 7.

tenet, however, can only be attacked properly with educated forces that have an understanding of the Iraqi people and time to demonstrate.

### **EXTERNAL SUPPORT**

There can be no comparison regarding the level of support the insurgents in Iraq are receiving externally when measuring material and personnel the VC received from North Vietnam, China, and ultimately the Soviet Union.<sup>36</sup> To date, the US has not seen a battalion of foreign fighters crossing the Syrian border into Iraq. However, the CAP could assist in disrupting the external support in an economy of force posture but the political and economic instruments coordinated are needed to defeat this tenet.

In the western portions of Iraq, the US and partners are failing to defeat the flow of foreign fighters and support from Syria. A CAP would deny receiving, staging, onward-movement, and integration (RSOI) of this external support. The US has known foreign fighters are moving through the Syrian border, paralleling the Euphrates River valley with an ultimate goal of Baghdad and disrupting the formation of a legitimate Iraqi government. If the US operational commanders continue to execute large-scale operations in this area, only to return to their FOB once complete, the sieve will never seal.

The CAP will have limited influence denying external finances and materials supporting the insurgency, however, those numbers are not known to be large. But the presence of a CAP in known areas that receive external support will deny insurgents a needed lifeline. Bottom line is the CAP will be a supporting effort to the national

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<sup>36</sup> Kagan, 9.

instruments of power in defeating external support to the Iraqi insurgency but if operational commanders continue to neglect this concept for more dynamic offensive operations, three decades will have come full circle without a lesson learned. This will be the least effected tenet by the CAP.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The objective in Iraq is to defeat the insurgency, provide a safe and secure environment, and assist in legitimizing the new government. The conventional heavy-handed approach has proven ineffective in establishing peace and democracy. An effective approach needs to have accurate intelligence, minimize force requirements, and demonstrate restraint concerning collateral damage as well as respecting the population and its culture. And when force is utilized it requires application in a discriminating manner to support all the above. A twenty-first century CAP, with a shot of steroids, is a tested and proven concept that warrants application today in Iraq.

In Vietnam the CAP at the lowest level, platoon, was task organized with one Marine infantry squad, a Navy corpsman, and a PF platoon across the board. Today, a recommended task organization should combine conventional forces, SOF, civil affairs, an interagency element, and Iraqi security forces to assist the counterinsurgency efforts. One template may be an infantry squad, SF advisors, a civil affairs team, a CIA analyst, and an Iraqi Army platoon. This template would provide a security and training element, an action arm for offensive operations, cultural savvy, knowledge for infrastructure rebuilding, and intelligence analysis all within an economy of force model. To note, a

template is just that and will not support each environment hence prior detailed analysis is required to assign the proper task organization. However, this strategy will only be effective if unified throughout the theater of operations, not divided as seen in Vietnam, by the operation commanders who are obligated to have a clear understanding of counterinsurgency warfare. Arguably, in three decades we have gone full circle and are again faced with the issue of multiple strategies for defeating the insurgents. In one corner we have the destruction of all insurgents as the main effort for a successful counterinsurgency and a supporting effort of pacification and population support. The US operational commanders need to compare both theories in similar environments and perhaps a unified successful strategy will appear.

Finally, a CAP supporting the “oil spot” strategy with this economy of force structure will further assist the growing concerns of diminishing US public support.<sup>37</sup> If operational commanders implemented the CAP theater wide, a significant number of forces would not be needed and a positive flow could return home to the US. Of course, this would be stressed throughout the defensive IO strategy. Furthermore, the CAP supports the US national strategy for victory within the security roadmap whereby once areas have been cleared of insurgents, those areas freed must remain under friendly control in order to enhance the Iraqi security infrastructure and deny sanctuary for insurgents.<sup>38</sup> The US is not following that aspect in certain areas and as such, the insurgency lifeline remains.

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<sup>37</sup> Krepinevich, 97.

<sup>38</sup> National Security Council, National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (Washington, D.C.: November 2005), 2.

## CONCLUSION

Critical to victory will be a unified effort against the insurgents in Iraq and not to persevere in relearning lessons from the past. The pages of history are written in this bloodshed. The US military has started incorporating counterinsurgency into its education systems throughout the leadership development process but it cannot be on an elective basis. A different, not new, mindset is required within the US military structure that can rapidly transition from the warrior ethos during conventional warfare to “other” activities during irregular warfare. Utilizing the CAP concept will assume more risk for US troops but to defeat the insurgency, support and compliance is needed throughout the population and the CAP will provide a supporting role.

Essential for success in this environment is a strategy that will effectively attack the identified tenets but requires a unified effort from the operational commanders. Security for the population, timely and accurate intelligence, minimizing collateral damage, and training of host nation forces to assume security responsibilities are critical as well. The CAP is a strategy that can assist the counterinsurgency in Iraq.

In Iraq, it is feasible for the US led coalition to adapt successful counterinsurgency methods and disregard concepts that have no record of success in this arena.<sup>39</sup> The CAP concept was implemented on a few occasions inside Iraq but never had the support of adjacent units or senior level military commanders, which caused for demobilization and a return to warfare by attrition. If the US military continues to ignore history and successful deeds, history will ultimately repeat itself.

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<sup>39</sup> Sepp, 12.

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